In Search of a New Life After Nagasaki

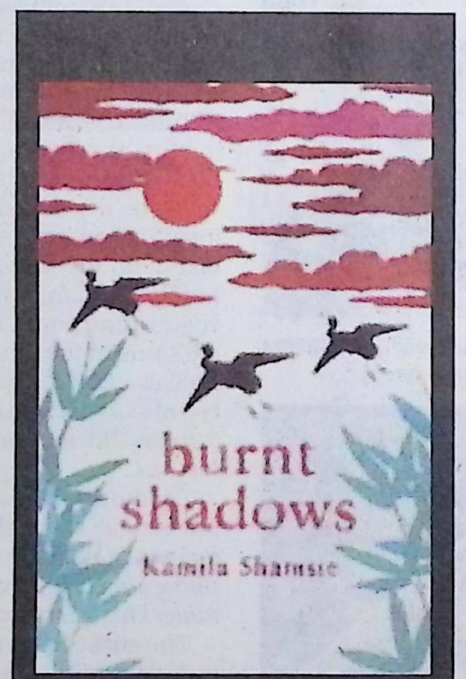
RACHEL ASPDEN

"How did it come to this?" asks Kamila Shamsie's new novel of one man's arrival, shackled and terrified, at what he guesses are the interrogation cells of Guantánamo Bay. In answering that question, Burnt Shadows distils much of the most notorious history of the past 65 years into its pages. It moves in space from Nagasaki to Delhi, Karachi, the Pakistani-Afghan frontier, New York, Canada and Cuba, and in time from the 1945 bombing of Nagasaki to Indian independence and partition, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the 9/11 attacks, the overthrow of the Taliban and America's subsequent extra-legal round-up of "enemy combatants". For once, the standard publisher's hyperbole - "sweeping in its scope" - is no more than the truth.

These tangled historical strands are bound together by Hiroko Tanaka, a Nagasaki-born polyglot who belongs everywhere and nowhere. When her German fiancé is killed by the atom bomb, she flees to the home of his sister, Ilse Weiss, and her English husband, James Burton, in Delhi. She falls in love with Burton's Muslim employee Sajjad Ashraf and they leave India to raise their son Raza in the new country of Pakistan, where their lives become fatally entangled with anti-Soviet mujahideen, the Taliban and the CIA, in the shape of the Burtons' Americanised son Harry. Through it all, Hiroko, branded by the bird-shaped scars - the "burnt shadows" - the bomb seared into her back, survives through her skill with new languages, her willingness to assume new identities and her refusal to judge others on their own origins.

Burnt Shadows is an argument for the fluidity of identity: "History had blown them all off course, no one ending - or even middling, where they had begun," Shamsie writes. The novel is pessimistic about the possibility of rootedness. Beloved places prove as ephemeral as relationships; even America, where Hiroko is delighted to hear "Urdu, English, Japanese, German all in the space of a few minutes", ultimately betrays her.

The redeeming counterpoint to all this turmoil, the novel hints, is a loyalty that goes beyond less elevated ties to home and family. The Tanaka-Ashrafs and the Weiss-Burtons "are each other's spiders," says Harry, a reference to the Muslim legend of a spider spinning a web across the mouth of a cave where the Prophet was hiding, throwing his pursuers off his trail. But Hiroko's commitment to this ideal has its own brutality. Days after Harry's death at the hands of an Afghan gunman, she manipulates his reluctant daughter Kim into smuggling an Afghan mujahid across the Canadian border and berates her for judging the man "on five minutes of conversation". As an argument for the merits of freewheeling cultural exchange, it is not convincing.



Burnt Shadows
by Kamila Shamsie
pp384, Bloomsbury, £14.99

Burnt Shadows is dense with history and principle, often at the expense of lightness of touch. Shamsie's prose is highly stylised - "Optimism. That was Sajjad's gift. She opened her mouth to breathe it in" - and her minor characters in particular can appear little more than ciphers. Oddly, in a novel so intent on the evils of national stereotyping, the Raj official James Burton lives in a colonial villa named "Bungle Oh!" and expresses his deepest feelings through cricketing metaphors.

When the novel shakes off its didactic tendencies, the results are moving snapshots of its characters' lost worlds. Sajjad recalls his father's story of the Emperor Shah Jehan cutting the Delhi sky with scissors to reveal the beautiful Jama Masjid mosque; Harry visits Karachi's chaotic ice- and fish-strewn harbour; Raza is overcome with excitement at running away to a mujahideen camp in the "vast, thrilling playground" of northern Pakistan. It is these vivid glimpses of particular corners of the world, rather than Hiroko's attempts to free herself from attachment to them, that are Burnt Shadows' best achievement.